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Gov. Andrew Cuomo and his father, former Gov. Mario Cuomo, celebrate Andrew's re-election at the Sheraton New York Times Square in New York City, Tuesday, Nov. 4, 2014. (Derek Gee/Buffalo News)

Which Governor Cuomo said this? Both, 28 years apart Despite time passing, little change seen in Albany

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ALBANY – Starting his sixth year in office, the governor stood before the Legislature and, in his State of the State, urged continued bipartisanship to tackle an “aggressive” agenda he was proposing for the coming year.

He presented a long laundry list. A minimum wage hike. Construction of 100,000 affordable housing units. Money for a new “community” school program, offering health and social services to students in high-needs districts. A competitive grant program to restore some downtown areas, which he called the “front doors” to communities.

There was more. Build on several years of “unprecedented” state aid hikes to public schools. Expand contracting opportunities for women and minority-owned businesses. And, in a bid to restore public trust, close campaign donation loopholes, pass taxpayer funding of campaigns and include the Legislature’s records under the state’s Freedom of Information Law.

“It would be wrong to forget that our essential purpose as a government is to improve the conditions of people’s lives,” the governor said.

So went then-Gov. Mario Cuomo’s State of the State message 28 years ago on Jan. 6, 1988. He entitled it “Building the 21st Century.”

That speech was remarkably similar to the speech and plans laid out by Cuomo’s son, Gov. Andrew Cuomo, last Wednesday.

Andrew Cuomo’s [State of the State](http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/governor-offers-). (<http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/governor-offers->

[ambitious-agenda-20160113](#))kicking off his own sixth year in office, also came with a title: “Built to Lead.”

Perhaps it’s a case of like father, like son. Or maybe the problems and opportunities facing New York State are historically systemic. But reading the words of Mario Cuomo and Andrew Cuomo at the beginning of each of their sixth year in office offers a lesson that Albany is one repetitive town.

“That’s fascinating,” said Gerald Benjamin, one of the state’s most respected political observers, when told of the similarities between the Cuomo addresses. After watching and reading many State of the State speeches, he said a common thread is that governors in their first year in office – no matter the party – seem to repeat themes about integrity in government or hope for the state’s future.

“I once went back to Al Smith, and I found his local government reform speech,” Benjamin said of the governor in the 1920s. “It wasn’t any different from Eliot Spitzer’s speech.”

Spitzer was in office just 14 months, serving until the beginning of 2008.

Benjamin, who runs a research center named after him at the State University of New York at New Paltz, believes the overlapping ideas in the two Cuomo speeches are driven more by the realities of governing in New York than family ties.

“There are a lot of persistent themes in state government,” Benjamin said. “Albany has the same problems it has always had.”

Goes around, comes around

In his 1988 message, Mario Cuomo thanked lawmakers in both parties for working with him the previous five years, and he declared a “new fiscal foundation” in which soaring deficits of the past had been closed, earning “a new reputation for fiscal integrity” and entry into an “era of economic resurgence in New York.”

Andrew Cuomo, last week, said much the same, as he talked of state government going from a deficit of \$10 billion when he took office in 2011 to a \$5 billion surplus today.

Both governors went out of their way to applaud a bipartisan, cooperative spirit that has enabled the state to focus new attention on specific problems facing New York.

Lawmakers, one Cuomo said, have shown how the concept of a “family of New York” has worked in Albany “when you called upon the rest of the state to help a troubled Western New York, when you asked New Yorkers who had homes to come to the assistance of the homeless.”

Which Cuomo said that?

Mario Cuomo, although his son is better known for more recently pouring hundreds of millions of dollars in special aid to the Buffalo area.

But Andrew Cuomo last Wednesday also said addressing homelessness will be a major spending priority for New York over the next five years.

In their 1988 and 2016 plans, both proposed a competition for cities seeking to improve their downtown core – or “central business districts,” as Mario Cuomo called them.

Both men proposed, in 1988 and 2016, that state aid to cities, towns and villages be frozen. Both, meanwhile, drew attention to their backing in their first five years in office for major aid increases to New York State’s 700 public school districts.

Both proposed a “community school” approach to help students living in poor areas.

Mario Cuomo offered a new pilot program for such schools, while his son is adding a major infusion of cash to an already-existing program so that more failing schools will be eligible to participate in the program.

“This community school program will make selected schools the focus of the comprehensive delivery of educational, health and social services,” the elder Cuomo said in 1988.

Both proposed food packaging labeling laws. Mario Cuomo asked lawmakers to expand the Seal of Quality labeling on food products; Andrew Cuomo proposed a “NY Certified High Quality” program to end vague labeling for products such as “all natural.”

Minimum wage hike

“We should guarantee workers a living wage that fairly compensates them and recognizes their contribution to our economy. The current minimum wage fails to do that,” the governor said.

Which Cuomo said that?

That was Mario Cuomo, but Andrew Cuomo offered the same sentiment and similar words.

In fact, Andrew Cuomo drew applause when he pressed for a hike in the state’s minimum wage during his 90-minute, 9,684 word speech.

There is a difference, though.

Mario Cuomo in 1988 called for an increase in the minimum wage from \$3.35 per hour to \$3.75 per hour. His son said the level should go from the present \$9 per hour to \$15 per hour.

Both Cuomos also focused part of their economic development initiatives on training people with new skills to find jobs.

“Our competitive advantage is the productivity of our people,” Mario Cuomo said in announcing a job training program.

Numbers have grown

Both called for big new state investments in environmental and agriculture programs, and more money for upstate tourism promotion.

Like his son, Mario Cuomo embraced a region-based economic development approach, calling for a tourism effort targeting rural areas.

Andrew Cuomo, though, outdid his father, proposing what his administration says is a \$100 billion investment of state, federal and private money on new roads, bridges, rail lines, airport improvements and several major real estate projects in Manhattan.

There are differences.

For starters, given the passage of years, the numbers in Andrew Cuomo’s speech were bigger. Mario Cuomo’s budget in 1988 was \$44 billion. Andrew Cuomo last week proposed a \$154 billion spending plan.

Mario Cuomo proposed an immediate, 12 percent minimum wage hike. Andrew Cuomo proposed a 66 percent increase in the wage level, though phased in over several years.

Mario Cuomo called for a \$325 million hike in state aid to schools, for a total of about \$7.5 billion. Andrew Cuomo requested a \$991 million aid increase to about \$25 billion in total state money to public schools.

Energy themes

Mario Cuomo lamented an “alarming” rise in oil imports. That is something his son does not have to worry about.

Mario vowed to fight the opening of the Shoreham nuclear plant on Long Island, arguing residents could not safely evacuate if there was an accident at the plant. He was successful. He also boasted of a deal to bring more hydropower from Quebec to downstate.

Andrew Cuomo vowed to end the use of coal in New York in four years and called for a major addition of money for the Environmental Protection Fund. Though he did not mention it last week, he has talked for years about closing downstate’s Indian Point nuclear plant for safety concerns.

Corruption-busting ideas

Both father and son made stronger ethics and campaign finance laws major themes of their addresses.

Mario Cuomo, citing the work of a special panel he established in 1987 using powers under the state's Moreland Act, called for changes that would increase voter turnout in elections and toughen campaign finance laws.

"I believe ... that the time has finally come to admit that we have allowed money to become too important to the election of public officials," Mario Cuomo said in 1988, as he called for smaller contribution limits and public financing of campaigns.

Mario Cuomo wanted the state's Freedom of Information law expanded, and he condemned the fact that "those convicted of corruptly using their public office for personal gain are allowed to draw a pension."

It was more than inside baseball, Mario Cuomo said.

"This message outlines a broad set of initiatives to meet the needs of the people of New York. But we cannot move forward on this aggressive agenda unless our citizens believe they are getting fair value from their government," the governor's message said that year.

Last week, Andrew Cuomo told lawmakers: "Remember, the stronger the citizen trust, the stronger the government's ability. We have a big agenda."

As with today, Mario Cuomo was governing at a time when high-profile corruption cases had hit everywhere from the state Capitol to City Hall in New York. The events drew the attention of the media around the country, with the Los Angeles Times in the fall of 1987 running a story about various scandals in New York involving some two dozen officials. "N.Y. Corruption Cases Breeding New Cynicism," the story's headline stated.

Andrew Cuomo also offered up many of the same anti-corruption ideas as his father more than a generation ago. Unlike his father, though, he did so just a month after the corruption convictions of two of the Legislature's former top leaders, Dean Skelos and Sheldon Silver.

Andrew Cuomo wants to close campaign finance loopholes that allow some donors to skirt what were intended as contribution limits. He also wants to bar pensions for lawmakers convicted of crimes, enact public financing of campaigns, and allow for automatic voter registration when registering vehicles or getting licenses at the Department of Motor Vehicles.

But Andrew Cuomo also goes a step further than his father: he wants a law limiting the outside earning ability of lawmakers to 15 percent of their base legislative pay.

Cuomo did not mention his own anti-corruption panel that he created using Moreland powers, a commission he shut down in 2014 after securing some ethics-related deals with lawmakers.

Some twists

Some passages of the two governor's addresses were close, but with twists.

Though Mario Cuomo talked of steps to provide alternatives to prison incarceration for some criminals, Andrew Cuomo took a step further, saying he will go down as the New York governor who closed the most prisons.

It was Mario Cuomo, though, who went on a prison-building spree, with a 45 percent growth of the inmate population from 1983 to 1988.

Mario Cuomo bashed Washington for not balancing its budgets, ignoring rising federal deficits and pushing problems, like homelessness, onto New York and other states to resolve. New York, he said, would act on its own in a number of areas, with or without Washington's assistance.

Andrew Cuomo bashed Washington for partisan bickering and gridlock that is hurting anti-terrorism intelligence and infrastructure improvements.

"Like so many issues, Washington just can't get it done. In New York, we can and we will," the governor

said.

Which Cuomo said it?

Andrew Cuomo, in the 239th State of the State.

“We’ve called our governance the New York Idea, a new realism that blends compassion and common sense, governs with both our hearts and our heads, and leads to progressive pragmatism.”

That was Mario Cuomo, in the 211th State of the State.

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